

Comfort Food and Throat
by Ellen van Neerven**SYNOPSIS**

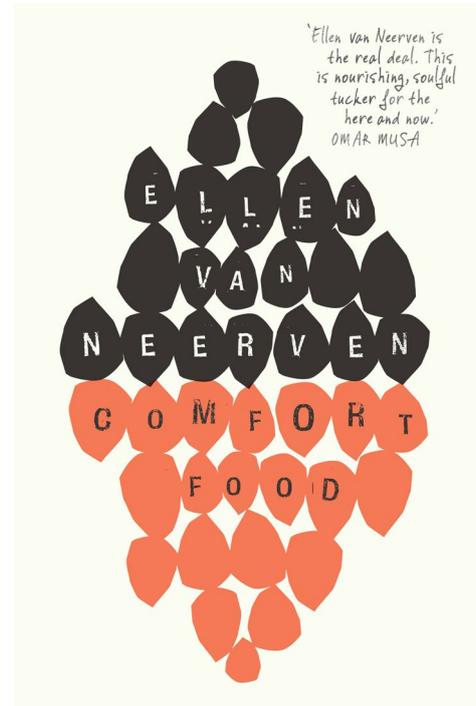
Comfort Food is Ellen van Neerven's first poetry collection, following their award-winning short-fiction debut, *Heat and Light*. In this collection of poetry, van Neerven uses memories tied to food to explore identity, sovereignty, and the restless quest for love. Using food as inspiration, van Neerven offers a cross-cultural vision of the unexpected and the familiar.

Throat is their explosive second poetry collection, which explores love, language and land, by shining a light on Australia's unreconciled past and precarious present. Unsparring in its interrogation of the colonial impulse, *Throat* manages to discuss deeply political issues with humour and heart.

As a queer First Nations author, van Neerven unflinchingly unpacks personal experiences, bringing the reader in to explore the intersectionality between the politics of race, sex and gender. The two collections of poetry have a political undercurrent, addressing both historical and present whitewashing of Australian culture, with *Throat* building on many themes introduced in *Comfort Food*. As part of the poem 'logonliveon' (p.11, *Throat*), van Neerven asks: 'in a socially fragile future / what will you say about you / what will you say about me / what will we remember?' Both collections will stick in readers' minds, long after the final pages have been turned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellen van Neerven is an award-winning writer of Mununjali Yugambah (South East Queensland) and Dutch heritage. They write fiction, poetry, plays and non-fiction. Ellen's first book, *Heat and Light*, was the winner of the David Unaipon Award, the Dobbie Literary Award and the NSW Premier's Literary Awards Indigenous Writers Prize. They have written two poetry collections: *Comfort Food*, which was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Awards Kenneth Slessor Prize; and *Throat*, which was shortlisted for the Queensland Literary Awards and the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, and won the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry, the Multicultural NSW Award and Book of the Year in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards.

**BOOK DETAILS**

B-format paperback | \$24.99
978 0 7022 5405 5

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Themes covered in Ellen van Neerven's poetry collections

Themes covered in this collection include:

- Identity and belonging
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander:
 - Community
 - Stories
 - Spirituality
 - Connection to country
- Race and racism
- Impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- LGBTQIA+ relationships and identity

Study notes

It is difficult to study texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors without an understanding of the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which the texts sit. For an overview of cultural and historical contexts with key resource links, see Reading Australia's teacher resource for [Ellen van Neerven's *Heat and Light*](#).

Some key background readings and resources include:

[Black Words Historical Events Calendar](#) – a resource outlining key people and events during various stages of colonised Australia's history, including the Government Protection Acts leading to removal of children for placement in missions and foster homes so as to be enculturated into Anglo customs (Stolen Generations).

[National Museum of Australia resource](#) – a resource on the Stolen Generations and the Bringing Them Home report.

[Importance of land and connection to country](#) – a resource explaining the role of country in First Nations culture, how central it is to wellbeing and what the connection to land means for First Nations people.



Study Notes – Comfort Food

- Van Neerven has stated that ‘Whole Lot’ (p. 3, *Comfort Food*) was written in response to Aunty Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s iconic painting *Big Yam Dreaming* (1995). Look at this artwork as a class, and discuss how the interrelatedness of culture is represented across both works of art.
- In ‘Whole Lot’ (p. 3, *Comfort Food*), van Neerven writes: ‘we start with black / let it get hold of you / look at the stars / or are you afraid to?’ What might the author be trying to say about Australia’s relationship with its own history?
- In ‘Berries’ (p. 28, *Comfort Food*), van Neerven writes: ‘it is when original people were acknowledged / the room breathes easier for me / a preoccupation with absence’. Discuss what the author means by absence, especially in relation to ‘finding the bears in buildings, universities, public gardens’.
- In ‘Chips’ (p. 21, *Comfort Food*), van Neerven writes ‘what is happening / with the dialogue of this country / they are killing people with words’. Discuss as a class what this might mean. Research the ‘history wars’ in Australia, and black armband history.
- In ‘Please Pause Today’ (p. 60, *Comfort Food*), van Neerven juxtaposes their own voice with the tweets of ex-SBS journalist Scott McIntyre (in italics) from Anzac Day in 2015. Scott McIntyre received very public backlash for his tweets and a similar experience occurred when Yassmin Abdel-Magied tweeted about Anzac Day a few years later.
 - o Discuss why there would be such intense public backlash for people who try to bring up issues of race around Anzac Day.
 - o Van Neerven writes that their grandfather fought for Australia ‘without citizenship, equal rights, equal pay’. Research the experiences of Indigenous soldiers before, during and after the two world wars and report back to the class. You can use van Neerven’s recounting that their grandfather was ‘denied entry into RSLs, restaurants, taxies / another entry to the cinema’ as a starting point.
 - o Research Indigenous soldiers’ motivations for joining the armed services during the wars. Are they different from those of non-Indigenous soldiers? Why might this be?
- The removal of Indigenous artefacts and remains is an often-undiscussed part of Australian history. In ‘Pinions’ (p. 6, *Comfort Food*), van Neerven writes: ‘And if they bring the artefacts back / Will we be restored?’.
 - o Research the Mungo Man and his return to his ancestral home. Why was this an important event in Australian history? What does the Mungo Man tell us about Indigenous spiritual and cultural connections to country?
 - o Watch the 2019 documentary *Etched in Bone*. Write a report about the spiritual importance of returning Indigenous remains to their original resting place.
 - o Why would van Neerven begin ‘Pinions’ by talking about a hawk and ‘what is ate alive’? Who is the hawk representing, and who is being represented as its prey?



- In 'Love and Tradition' (p. 5, *Comfort Food*), van Neerven draws parallels between climate change and the loss of culture during colonisation.
 - o 'rising sea / takes and / breaks into backyards / to trouble families // we cannot live with the seas in our bellies / we cannot rest / with the sea at our legs'. The sea levels are rising in the Torres Strait Islands at double the speed they are rising elsewhere in the world. Research how climate change is impacting the Torres Strait Islands, and the people who live there. What can schools do to help with the climate emergency?
 - o 'island / of love and tradition / let them see / what has gone under'. What might this mean, in relation to what you researched above about climate change and the Torres Strait Islands.
- In 'Invisible Spears' (p. 63, *Comfort Food*), van Neerven writes: 'you don't want us protecting / our land like the Maori / that means it was our land to protect / we don't need / a haka of whitefullas / just let us resist'.
 - o What is van Neerven saying about the concept of terra nullius in relation to the invasion of Australia?
 - o Research Aboriginal resistance during invasion. Divide students into groups and have each student report on a resistance warrior. What does this resistance say about terra nullius and the legality of the British 'settlement' of Australia?

Study Notes – Throat

- Van Neerven begins this work with 'they haunt-walk in' (p. 3, *Throat*), a poem that is written in the form of a short story.
 - o Research what 'the incident' might be and unpack this as a class. How does van Neerven respond to the cyber bullying they received? How did race play a part in the trolling of van Neerven?
- In '18Cs', van Neerven writes in 18 stanzas. Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act states:
 1. It is unlawful for a person to do an act, otherwise than in private, if:
 - a. The act is reasonably likely, in all the circumstances, to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or a group of people; and
 - b. the act is done because of the race, colour or national or ethnic origin of the other person or of some or all of the people in the group.

Research famous cases that have been brought to the court around Section 18C. What do these cases say about race and racism in Australia today?

- In "“postcolonial” musings in Urup' (p. 36, *Throat*), van Neerven talks about wolves, beavers and squirrels, animals that are not native to Australia. What do you think van Neerven is trying to say about the experiences of Indigenous peoples globally?
- In 'The Only Blak Queer in the World' (pp. 20–23, *Throat*) van Neerven describes their journey to becoming comfortable with their own sexuality. How does their perspective change throughout the course of the poem? How does their language change as their experiences change?
- 'Acts of protection' (p. 24, *Throat*) is written in six short, numbered stanzas, giving it the appearance of a policy document. Why do you think it has been written this way? The Aboriginal Protection Act was a policy that led to the grief and suffering of many First Nations peoples and families. Research the Act and discuss why the poem would have been written in this way.

- In 'Acts of protection' (p. 24, *Throat*), van Neerven writes 'telling us who we are / not who we aren't / defying a fixed identity'. What do you think they mean by 'fixed identity'? What stereotypes do you think they are referring to? How do the earlier lines in the poem 'showing pride in handwriting / leaving notes to find / in the kitchen / picking me up from school with / puppy at your knees / giving love shape' contribute to the breaking of stereotypes?
- In 'Vinegar' (p. 25, *Throat*), van Neerven writes: 'When we clean houses we do so knowing that they are watching / and our lives depend on it. / When we teach our children to clean houses we do so knowing / that they are watching and our lives depend on it.' Van Neerven wonders 'does the intergenerational load get lighter or heavier?'
 - Who do you think van Neerven is referring to when they say: 'they are watching'?
 - What does it mean 'our lives depend on it'?
 - Research the Stolen Generations and the intergenerational impacts that these policies had on First Nations families.
 - Why do you think the poem was named 'Vinegar'?
- A recurring theme throughout *Throat* is the concept of allies and allyship.
 - How is allyship expressed through language choices – 'call it invasion not settlement / call it genocide not colonisation' – in 'Call a Spade a Spade' (p. 39, *Throat*)?
 - How is performative allyship discussed in 'Expert' (p. 45, *Throat*)? How are stereotypes reversed in this poem?
 - What do you think van Neerven is saying about allyship in 'White Excellence' (p. 56, *Throat*)?
 - Listen to Thelma Plum's song 'Woke Blokes' and consider how discussions of allyship are important.
- Read 'TREATY' (pp. 60–61, *Throat*). What does the treaty between van Neerven and the reader tell us about the poet's view of the lack of treaty between Australia and its First Nations peoples? Research the treaty movement in Australia and discuss why we are one of the few countries without a treaty.
- How does van Neerven use blank spaces to add emphasis in their poem on page 99 of *Throat*?
- In 'The cities that ate Australia' (p. 114, *Throat*), van Neerven writes: 'They make us feel like we should be so grateful just to be here.' Unpack what this might mean in the context of Indigenous Australians.
- Climate change politics are discussed across the two poems 'QLDR' (pp. 118–119, *Throat*) and 'Politicians having long showers on stolen land' (p. 120–121, *Throat*). Research the environmental issues van Neerven writes about and discuss how they impact the Indigenous communities who are the traditional custodians of the country.



1. Consider the artwork used on the cover of *Throat*. Ellen van Neerven has previously stated that, 'For me it represents diversity, not only diversity of First Nations peoples, you know, that we come in various skin colours with various kinds of roles and places, but also diversity of the LGBTIQ community as well' (<https://thegarretpodcast.com/at-home-with-ellen-van-neerven/>). Design a new cover for *Throat* or for *Comfort Food*. Explain your artistic choices and why your art fits with your chosen collection.
2. Van Neerven has dedicated 'Invisible Spears' (p. 63, *Comfort Food*) to Adam Goodes, and explains that 'GI' refers to Greg Inglis, an Indigenous NRL player who celebrated his try scoring with a goanna crawl. Watch the 2019 documentary *The Australian Dream*, and read the 2021 Collingwood report on systemic racism. What do van Neerven's poetry, and the documentary and the report, tell us about how Australia celebrates its Indigenous sportsmen and sportswomen?
3. Musgrave Park is a place of significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who live in Brisbane. What do you think van Neerven was trying to say in 'At Musgrave' (p. 50, *Comfort Food*)? In 'G20 Free Range' (p. 61, *Comfort Food*), van Neerven talks about walking to a park. Research the history of Musgrave Park in Brisbane, and why it is often the final meeting place for First Nations protestors. Within your own city, what are other sites of significance for First Nations peoples?
4. 'The Only Blak Queer in the World' (p. 20, *Throat*) gives many examples of Queer First Nations art and artists. Research the artists mentioned, and report back to the class.

About the writer of the Teachers' Notes

Beth Madsen is a Murri woman from Meanjin. She was a practising teacher in both rural and urban settings, before beginning her PhD study at the University of Queensland. She currently teaches into a variety of pre-service teacher education subjects, but particularly enjoys working with educators to embed Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in their teaching.

